



CHILDHOOD TRAUMA REACTIONS:
TIP SHEET SERIES

HOW AND WHEN TO GET HELP

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CHILDHOOD TRAUMA REACTIONS: HOW AND WHEN TO GET HELP

Teachers are often in the best position to notice when children need help managing their reactions to traumatic events like natural disasters. However, sometimes it can be quite difficult to work out what is happening for the young person by just observing their behaviour. Here are some hints for how you can work out when and what you might need to do to arrange help for your students.

Talk to the young person

One of the best ways to work out if the young person needs help is to talk to them. There are a few things you can do to make this a bit easier.

- Let your student know that you are concerned and want to help. Having someone who will listen is often exactly what youth are after.
- Get the school counsellor or guidance officer involved if you think you need help or the young person won't talk at all.
- Get background information. Talk about your concerns with the young person's parents/caregiver.
- Dealing with disclosures: Sometimes when talking to young people, they may disclose sensitive information, either about the traumatic event you are discussing, or about other traumatic events that you were not aware of. It is important for teachers to be aware of their duties and responsibility to both the young person and others and to consult with school administrators where appropriate.

How to determine whether the problem is serious?

It is normal for children to show some changes in behaviour, or difficulties managing emotions immediately following exposure to a traumatic event. Fortunately, the majority of children are resilient and will return to their normal functioning over time. However, some young people will experience more intense and interfering reactions or reactions that persist over time, which most often benefit from further assessment and intervention.

Further assessment or intervention may be indicated if:

- Symptoms persist (> 1 month) or worsen over time.
- The young person shows a significant decline in concentration, academic performance or classroom participation that interferes with their daily functioning or causes significant distress.
- Ongoing or worsening difficulties regulating emotions (eg, difficulty controlling emotions such as crying, anger).
- Significant and lasting changes in social functioning (eg, withdrawing from friends, fighting, interpersonal difficulties, physical and verbal aggression) that causes problems for the young person or others.
- Behaviours that disrupt others and the classroom environment on a regular basis.
- Behaviours or difficulties that prevent the young person from engaging in age-appropriate tasks or developing appropriately (eg, advancing academically, advancing socially, maturing appropriately, interruptions to developmental milestones such as speech, language)
- Return to a behaviour typical of a younger child (eg, difficulties toileting, using 'baby talk').
- Evidence that the problems exist outside of school as well. For example, the problem occurs in multiple settings (at home, with friends, at school).
- The presence of ongoing stressors outside of school which may exacerbate difficulties (eg, financial difficulties, housing issues, parental separation, death of a family member).

How to get help?

There are many different ways in which you can help the young person and their family. It is important to know when you can help, when to utilise school-based resources and when you might need to make a referral to an external agency. Below are some guidelines/suggestions for what you can do when you think the child needs further help.

- School-based support services can be a good starting point.
- Be familiar with your school's guidelines and policies for such issues.
- Get to know the support resources available within your school such as guidance officers, school nurses, school psychologists, support workers and principals.
- Think about what you as a teacher can do to help the young person or the whole class following traumatic situations.
- Refer on for further assistance.

How to refer for further help?

Sometimes, no matter how supportive the classroom or home environment is, a young people may still require professional assistance following a traumatic event. It may be helpful to discuss referral options with parents and/or the young person. Early intervention is considered important. Referral options are as follows:

- **Community services and help lines:** There are some services that parents and young people (and teachers) can access at any time, without having to go in and see someone in person. Many of these can be found on the internet, and a few key services are listed below. Your guidance officer or school counsellor might be able to help you find more services available in your area.
 - Kids Helpline – **1800 551 800**
 - Lifeline – **13 11 14**
 - Parentline – **13 22 89**
 - Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement – **1300 664 786**
 - Beyond Blue – **www.beyoungblue.org.au**
- **General practitioner:** Families can see their local general practitioner (GP) for an assessment and referral to a psychologist or counsellor.
- **Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS):** ATAPS is a service which enables GPs under the Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care (BOiMHC) program to refer consumers to allied health professionals who deliver focussed psychological strategies. Families should visit their GP to gain further information.
- **Mental health professionals:** Young people and parents can also seek private individual assistance from various allied health professionals, in particular, clinical psychologists who are trained in assessment, diagnosis and treatment of various emotional and behavioural difficulties in childhood and adolescence.
- **Community-based mental health professionals:** Families may be eligible to receive assistance through their local Child and Adolescent (Youth) Mental Health Service (CAMHS or CYMHS). In most instances, families are able to self-refer for this service by calling their local centre.
- **Private mental health professionals:** Families are also able to arrange for assistance through private psychologists. Availability of psychologists will vary according to location and it is recommended that families first contact their GP to obtain a referral and to assess their eligibility for rebates through Medicare. In addition, families may also be eligible for rebates through private health funds and should contact their health provider to enquire about rebates. Parents may also independently seek private practitioners through the Australian Psychological Society (APS) at: **www.psychology.org.au/FindaPsychologist**